WHAT WAS EDUCATION LIKE 90 YEARS AGO?

"Times and people change, but ideas and common sense remain the same."

WHAT was education like in New Haven, Connecticut, 90 years ago? Recently, at a barn sale, I bought a copy of the "Report to the Board of Education" by the Superintendent of Schools in 1884. This is a fascinating summary of education quite different from education today.

The schools' budget for expenditures then was listed as $361,003.74. Today's budget is over $30,000,000. The salary of the superintendent in 1884 was $2,700. Today's superintendent earns almost $30,000. The number of schools has grown from 37 in 1884 to 46 today, and the per pupil cost has risen from $21.00 to around $1,200.00.

I was particularly interested in comparing my school, Winchester, which was built in 1952, with the old Winchester school built in 1882 on a site in the backyard of the present Winchester school.

In 1884, Winchester's principal had to be in charge of three schools: Winchester, Dixwell Avenue, and Goffe Street. There were 14 teachers at Winchester, 7 teachers at Dixwell, and 3 at Goffe, called an Ungraded School; a total of 24 teachers in three buildings to supervise. I have 29 classroom teachers and 8 full-time supportive teachers; plus teacher aides and part-time staff. The principal in those days had 1,160 pupils to worry about with 696 at Winchester school alone. I have about 600 pupils with a full-time assistant and a Guidance Counselor. He was alone. What is interesting to note is that attendance for pupils for the year 1884 was 93 percent. Last year our percent of attendance for pupils was 91 percent. Winchester class size in 1884 was about 50 pupils per teacher. Class size today stands at about 20 pupils per teacher. We would never want to go back to those days.

Inexperienced Teachers "Go Astray"

In the area of educational philosophy it may be noted that supervising inexperienced teachers was as big a problem then as it is today.

Young and inexperienced teachers, however well trained oftentimes go astray. They substitute talking for teaching. They drive their pupils wild by scolding. They permit bad habits to creep into the reading, singing, or reciting. They fail to prepare a definite plan of work, and enter the school unprepared to teach the lesson of the day. Weekly visits to such teachers are

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of little account. They need daily attention, and when they are located at a distance from the central school, if the principal cannot reach them several times each week, there is evidence that his district is too large. If each principal had no more than twenty school-rooms to care for, it would be better than at present, since one principal the past year has had to superintend thirty-four rooms. Twenty rooms with an attendance of fifty pupils in each, would make an average yearly cost of $2.50 per child for local supervision, which is certainly not extravagant, if the benefits accruing are so great.

Mr. Samuel T. Dutton, Superintendent of Schools, also had advice to give to principals in his 1884 report:

There is one danger to be guarded against, which the principals themselves doubtless realize, and that is the consumption of time by petty details and interruptions, which leads to a superficial and hasty inspection of work, rather than a sustained and searching examination, and the prompt application of correctives.

Grading and marking pupils was an area of concern in 1884. The Superintendent talked about some recent changes in the grading system:

Arbitrary standards were sometimes set up; unnatural ideas were often conceived of the necessity for stern authority and rigid discipline; and the mind of the child was treated as though it had but one faculty, to wit, memory. Under this regime “ranking and marking” comprised a large part of the teacher’s daily toil. Every recitation in the classroom, and every phase of conduct had a percentage value, and was expressed in that imperishable record, which always stood to cheer or depress the student according to his “standing.” When it was high or low, a modification of the marking system in our schools was begun some years ago, and at the present time many objectional features are omitted. In the grammar schools, teachers are allowed to mark or not as they choose, and at the end of each month a simple card is sent to the parent giving a very brief and general statement concerning the two items of “conduct” and “recitations.” It is seldom that I find teachers devoting their attention to marking in those grades. They rely more on the general impressions gained from day to day, and can readily express an opinion concerning the merits of each pupil. But in the High School, while the management is wise, and the instruction of a high order, there has been less change from the old plan of marking than could be desired.

Twelve Young Ladies

According to the report, a training school for grammar school teachers had just opened. “Twelve young ladies” entered in the spring and in the fall 18 more students would be enrolled. The course of study included six months in the study of methods and principles at Welch School and the rest of the year would be devoted to practice teaching and criticism at Cedar Street School. Those interested in admission had to be able to complete the following requirements:

1. Good health; a pleasant disposition; sound moral character; a good record for scholarship in the New Haven High School, or in some other school of high grade.

2. Careful reviews of subject matter. A depth background in Geography, with one Continent “developed in the most scientific way.” A strong knowledge of History, Arithmetic, and Language.

3. A working knowledge of Physiology with “especial attention to the great functions of the body, and their proper exercise; fitness and variety of exercise; how to sit and stand; the nervous system; reflex action, sensation, and the special senses and their cultivation; how to preserve good sight; the blood, and its distribution and circulation; food, kind and quantity, when and how to eat; air, and the organs of breathing; oxidation of the blood; importance of fresh air and ventilation.” We don’t do enough of this in our teacher training courses today. Many times principals or supervisors find classrooms hot and stuffy and children falling asleep because teachers haven’t opened windows to secure proper ventilation.

4. A development of the best methods of primary instruction in the actual teaching of children, accompanied by the exposition of principles and aims with practice in laying out a course of teaching by appropriate steps. Also a study of the methods of the Kindergarten with illustrative lectures on the gifts and occupations.

5. Lessons on plants and minerals and practice in adapting these lessons to primary pupils.

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6. The History of Education, with the help of some work like Browning’s Theories. A study of educational principles as presented in Fitch’s Lectures, Currie’s Common School Education, and Parker’s Notes of Talks on Teaching.


8. A course of reading, bearing on professional work. Observation and teaching in the school room. The superintendent of schools taught the courses in Psychology and the History of Education and will do so again during the next year’s term.

A final statement in the superintendent’s report regarding class size:

At the Orchard Street School, we have been able to see and to prove how much more and better work can be done when a teacher has but forty pupils, than when crowded with fifty-five or sixty pupils.

It seems that there is really “nothing new under the sun.” Times and people change but ideas and common sense remain the same. We should note what it was like 90 years ago especially in the area of teacher preparation and evaluate what we are doing now.